

Consensus in social science and society: the relevance of Chantal Mouffe's agonistic pluralism for sociological theory.

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Abstract: In sociological theory, one longstanding debate concerns *consensus* and *conflict*, often exemplified by contrasting Durkheim (or Parsons) as a consensus viewpoint on society with Marx as conflict viewpoint (e.g., Giddens, 1993: 721). In this paper, I want to advocate the relevance of the work of political philosopher Chantal Mouffe to elucidate the idea and problems with consensus as well as take the debate one step further and shift to a debate on meta-consensus.

Intuitively the meta-consensus can be understood as the (minimum) common ground or the shared framework which accommodates the plurality of perspectives and conflicts in society. A more exact formulation of the meta-consensus results however in a variety of accounts (compare e.g. Rawls, 1993; Mouffe, 2005; Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006). Where the discussion between consensus theorists and conflict theorists has often been characterised as theorists simply talking past each other the debate on meta-consensus does not seem to be that easily solved. I will present different accounts elaborated in political philosophy and democratic theory, and especially advocate Chantal Mouffe's version of the meta-consensus.

Mouffe's understanding of (meta-)consensus and pluralism can help us to elucidate and advance the concept both in the sociology of science (cf. Van Bouwel, 2009) and in sociological theory.

References

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